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Making migration safer [updated]

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Abstract: In a globalising market, labour migration in low-skilled sectors plays an important role. A growing number of poor people move between their villages of origin, capital cities, and international destinations, while financially sustaining their families and home countries. The positive role of remittances for alleviating the poverty of sending countries is widely acknowledged. However, migration also leads to a growing imbalance between rural and urban areas and certain unfavourable societal changes. Drawing on case studies in Central and South Asia, this issue of evidence for policy examines the challenges of making migration safer and more beneficial for low-skilled workers.

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research evidence for policy



Kathmandu airport: Nepali workers about to depart for the Gulf region (2012). Outmigration and resulting remittances are a main pillar of Nepal's economy. Photo: Anita Ghimire

Making migration safer

NCCR north south



Case studies featured here were conducted in: India, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Pakistan

Policy message

- Labour migrants in the low-skilled sector have a strong potential to be development agents in poverty alleviation.
- Considering migration in development means taking into account the different stages of migration, from departure to return. For example, information and vocational training benefit migrants before they leave the country.
- Circular migration should be facilitated by governments with measures such as flexible residency, citizenship rights, and portable benefits.
- The migrants' social and economic security and the impact on families left behind should be considered.

- In a globalising market, labour migration in low-skilled sectors plays an important role. A growing number of poor people move between their villages of origin, capital cities, and international destinations, while financially sustaining their families and home countries. The positive role of remittances for alleviating the poverty of sending countries is widely acknowledged. However, migration also leads to a growing imbalance between rural and urban areas and certain unfavourable societal changes. Drawing on case studies in Central and South Asia, this issue of *evidence for policy* examines the challenges of making migration safer and more beneficial for low-skilled workers.

Circular migration

- Worldwide, more than 214 million people live outside their countries of origin. About half of these are labour migrants, making significant contributions to the economies of both receiving (host) and sending (home) countries. This has resulted in a widespread recognition of the advantages of migration. Policymakers and development agencies now consider labour migrants as new development agents. For example, the UN has initiated a High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (since 2006). Or in the case of Nepal, the

government recently drafted a national "Foreign Employment Policy 2011" – this policy is the most relevant national norm governing international labour migration out of Nepal.

Despite increased international and national awareness of migrants and their economic contributions, much remains to be done in terms of clarifying and improving their legal status. NCCR North-South research on migration in Asian countries has shown that due to their perceived temporary status and high mobility, migrants' rights as citizens as well as their living

Featured case studies

Radio programme for Nepali migrants

For many people from Nepal, outmigration has become an increasingly important livelihood strategy, and outmigration is now a pillar of Nepal's economy. While the situation for Nepali migrants has improved, research results suggest that migrants from rural areas of Nepal often lack a solid basis for making informed choices about working abroad, since public and private services for migrants are concentrated in Kathmandu. Migrants' main source of information tends to be the brokers at employment agencies (known locally as "manpower agencies") who help arrange for work placements abroad. But the information that brokers provide is often biased or distorted to benefit the agencies themselves and does not necessarily help migrants make informed choices. A radio project has made it possible to better inform migrants and potential migrants of the dangers and opportunities they face. The programme was set up as an information bulletin in partnership with an NGO, researchers, and a group of women migrant returnees. About 200 local "listeners' clubs" were established to provide radio access, collect feedback, and encourage wider dissemination of information. As no sound migration policy and official information mechanisms exist in Nepal to date, the programme has helped bridge the information gap.

Need for infrastructure development in Kyrgyz migration areas

Small and medium-sized towns are important intermediary points between rural and urban areas in Kyrgyzstan. They provide social and economic services that not only make a return of migrants more likely but also enable non-migrants to obtain access to health care, childcare, and education. Scholars call for policies that support urban-rural integration and provide public investment to encourage the flow of goods and resources across sectors and locations. A more integrated economy offers more choices and allows individuals and households to pursue their own best paths out of poverty. The rise of a more diversified non-farm economy can thus result in positive transformation.

- and working conditions are still frequently neglected by both their host country and their home country.

Remittance economies in Asia

- Migration benefits both host and home countries. Host countries benefit economically, since migrants contribute labour. And home countries benefit economically, since migrants send home remittances. Indeed, remittances are the second-most important source of external funding for South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Nepal.
- In Nepal's case, remittances from labour migration have been identified as accounting for 22 percent of the country's GDP (World Bank 2013).
- Despite a recent protracted civil war in Nepal, the country has managed to achieve several of its MDG goals related to economic and social aims. Most experts and development practitioners in Nepal credit remittances for enabling sustained improvements in the lives of many Nepalis, even during times of severe conflict. In Pakistan, remittances were a major source of funding in rebuilding the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) after the earthquake in 2005. Examples from Central Asia show that Kyrgyzstani migrants working in Russia and Kazakhstan send home remittances that contribute as much as 30 percent of the country's GDP in a given year (World Bank 2013).

Alleviating poverty

The positive role of remittances and their potential contribution for poverty alleviation has been recognised across South Asia. Bangladesh and Pakistan have set up separate ministries for the welfare of their migrant communities abroad. In rural communities with little cash income, even small transfers of money are highly valued as they reduce vulnerability to risks such as crop failure, food shortages, or disease. For Nepali migrants and their families, having family members in neighbouring India assures access to medical treatment and education. It also means there are fewer family members straining the household budget.

Economies that have grown dependent on remittances, however, are vulnerable. Researchers have found that unreliable remittances are a major financial threat to households in rural NWFP, Pakistan. Further, remittances alone cannot replace the overall contribution made by family members to their family (e.g., through parental or family care) or made by citizens to their state (e.g., through participation in the political process or social movements).

Countries' shifting migration role

South Asia is not just a region that sends migrants elsewhere. It is also an important receiving and transit region. For example, though known globally as a migrant-sending country, Nepal itself hosts many Bangladeshi



An older couple and their grandchild in Kyrgyzstan: those who remain behind are often greatly affected by the insecure position of family members working abroad. Thus, introducing measures that assure safe migration also aids non-migrating family members – frequently elderly people who must care for small children. Photo: Kazu Ahmed (2008)

and Indian workers as well as Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees. Due to differing national migration policies in the region, certain countries function as transition hubs and meeting places for professionals of different nationalities. For example, while there are strict policies in place that limit migration between India and Pakistan, both Indians and Pakistanis can easily migrate to Nepal. In this way, Nepal and other countries (e.g., Maldives) have become favourable meeting and transition hubs for migrants from other countries in South Asia.

Rural–urban divide

The interdependence between internal and international migration is clearly apparent. While the urban–rural divide is a driving factor of migration, it is also perpetuated as a result of migration. People leave their villages in search of opportunities in the cities – in their own country or abroad. A study in Kyrgyzstan has shown that although most migrants wish to return to their home country, their first choice would be the capital, Bishkek, rather than their village of origin. Reasons not to return to rural areas include fewer economic opportunities and a lack of social or medical services.

Social change

Migration redefines the division of labour and responsibilities. This affects migrants themselves and those who remain behind. In Pakistan, agricultural work has become increasingly feminised due to male outmigration. In Nepal, migration itself has become feminised, as female outmigration is a growing trend. NCCR North-South researchers discovered that those who remain behind not only face a greater workload, they also assume more decision-making responsibility – as found in the case of migrants' wives left behind in Nepal. During the Maoist conflict in Nepal, women were also left to negotiate with the conflicting parties – a new dynamic in the Nepali context.

Social and economic protection

While migrants' remittances are welcomed by their home countries, the migrants themselves are rarely considered in policymaking and development interventions. In the host countries, migrants' mobility is often

restricted, their livelihoods are left vulnerable, and they themselves are harassed by the authorities. Lack of adequate education, lack of knowledge about the host country, and insecure working and living conditions make it hard for migrants to recover the costs associated with migration (e.g., debts, placement fees, travel), hamper their ability to send remittances to relatives back home, and prevent them from saving enough money to invest in the future. Many migrants live from hand to mouth.

The female face of migration

National migration policies are often gendered and limit the international migration of women. Nepal, for example, has restricted women's labour migration to specific countries, such as the Gulf States. This was supposedly done in the name of "positive discrimination" – in order to protect women from being exploited as domestic workers. However, women have continued to migrate from Nepal, often using irregular channels that expose them to even greater risk. While a recent policy amendment ended Nepal's total ban on female labour migration to Gulf countries, women under the age of 32 are still restricted from doing so. In Pakistan, female labour migration was completely banned for many years. Now, for the first time, a new draft policy currently under discussion would enable broad-based female labour migration.

Featured case studies, cont.

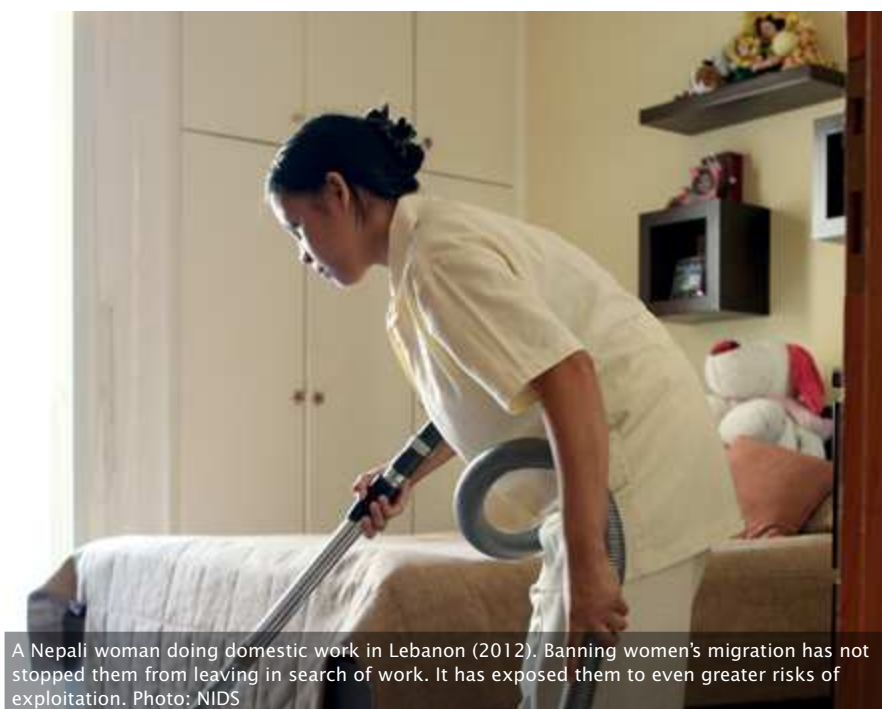
Strengthening migrants' wives in Pakistan

In Pakistan, male labour migration often increases the vulnerability of family members who remain behind. In particular, women's mobility is often restricted in the absence of male companions. Migrants' wives face greater difficulties in accessing health care facilities because a male chaperone is typically required for them to venture outside the homestead. Yet, international experience has shown that social networks based on women's common interest and characterised by more egalitarian relations between the members have the potential to enhance their resilience. Therefore, village organisations, researchers, and NGOs have entered into a partnership to promote the formation of inter-household, village-level organisations among transnational migrants' wives in the Upper Dir district in Pakistan.

Definition

Circular migration

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines circular migration as the fluid movement, of people between countries, including temporary or long-term movement which may be beneficial to all involved if occurring voluntarily and linked to the labour needs of countries of origin and destination (www.iom.int).



A Nepali woman doing domestic work in Lebanon (2012). Banning women's migration has not stopped them from leaving in search of work. It has exposed them to even greater risks of exploitation. Photo: NIDS



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Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

- Migration policies should separately address the different stages of migration: life in the home country, pre-departure preparations, and travelling to as well as working and living in the host country. The lives and movements of low-skilled workers (mainly from rural areas) should be systematically addressed when planning, implementing, and evaluating development programmes in home and host countries. There should also be greater cooperation between institutions that are formally in charge of migration issues and others that are not, such as migrants' associations or local microfinance groups.
- Facilitating beneficial circular migration requires elimination of disincentives to such circulation, primarily by providing flexible residency and citizenship rights. This would not only reduce irregular migration and risks of human trafficking, it would also allow migrants to limit expenses associated with migration, enabling them to save money and acquire the skills needed for a more successful return.
- Efforts must be made to improve migrants' social and economic security through stable access to pension funds, health insurance, and opportunities for career development. Mitigation efforts must also address the vulnerability of family members who remain behind. Researchers point out the need to improve rural populations' living conditions through greater access to health care, childcare, and education; and through more investment in rural infrastructure such as transport and communications systems.
- Policymakers and the private sector should make migration safer and more beneficial for migrants by providing adequate information on the migration process and the destination countries. Before leaving, workers should be given the opportunity to receive training in the skills required by host countries' labour markets.

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evidence for policy

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